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ABSTRACT

In order to profile the reality of change within the Hungarian postsecondary education sector and to develop a portrait of the predominant themes in the reconceptualization of Hungarian vocational instruction, interviews were conducted with eight vocational experts from Hungary who visited vocational education programs in the United States. The literature on vocational education in the United States and Hungary was reviewed. Restructuring and updating of vocational curricula in Hungary was found to be under the direction of the Ministry of Labor rather than an educational body; programs were devised primarily for work force preparation. The loosely structured interviews consisted of five questions with key probing terms identified prior to the interviews. The data collected revealed a comprehensive view of applied education in Hungary. Three clusters of common themes were identified: learner or student autonomy, administrative autonomy, and teacher and faculty autonomy. (Author/YLB)

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A Profile of Perceptions held toward Vocational and Technical Education Programs in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the world applied education is a dynamic and evolving facet to postsecondary education. Thc changes are especially evident in Hungary, in part because of the constant state of flux that exists in this region, because of the European realization of the need for progress and renewal. In order to profile the reality of change within the Hungarian postsecondary education sector, a series of interview with vocational experts from Hungary were completed.

The data collected revealed a comprehensive view of applied education in Hungary. From eight interviewers, three clusters of common themes were identified: learner or student autonomy, administrative autonomy, and teacher and faculty autonomy. These three areas provided a basis for which the scope of applied education in Hungary was studied, and for future research on Eastern Europe and Hungarian educational reform.

Vocational education has been developed and has evolved through a number of different histories, each one adding a unique dimension to the historical development of applied education (Miller & Mahler, 1991). With a substantial component of the development and formalization of applied education being drawn from western Europe, any cross-cultural descriptions or international portraits must reflect a difference in traditions and cultures. Left for individual interpretation based on first-hand experiences, cross-cultural differences have been rarely described in detail in either practition, based or schoarly literature.

Occupational and vocational education programs were initially developed through an apprenticeship structure which has gradually given way to a competency or skill based formal education structure. This structure is predicated on the parallel development of cognitive and technical skills, while seeking to enhance abilities and skills in interpersonal relations (Calhoun & Finch, 1976).

In addition to the cross-cultural comparison of vocational education for the sake of a multi-cultural understanding, both Western and Eastern European communities can work toward a more effective vocational curriculum through greater mutual understanding of each other. As the Hungarian business and education community work to reconceptualize vocational training, a great deal can be learned through an analysis of the successes and failures of applied education in the United States.

Similarly, as federal directives refocus and redefine vocational education in the U. S. and with the pending expiration of Perkins II, vocational educators and policy makers can learn a great deal from their Hungarian counterparts.

In light of the potential benefits which can be developed through a mutual understanding of vocational education curricula, purpose, and policy, this paper was developed as an extension of subcontracting activities associated with the World Bank's current work in Hungary. Specifically, the purpose for conducting this investigation was to develop a portrait of the predominat themes in the reconceptualization of Hungarian vocational instruction. Considering existing literature, the study was based on a series of interviews with vocational experts from Hungary who visited various vocational education programs in the United States.

Background of the Study

Vocational Education in the U. S.

Vocational education has been defined in the U. S. as developmental skill instruction based on a hierarchial approach to learning. Professional associations in the U. S. have gone so far as to issue a formal definition of vocational instruction, utilizing the ideas and theory of applied education as the base for instruction and interpretation (American Vocational Association, 1990).

Vocational instruction in the U.S. has traditionally been offered throughout primary and secondary education levels. Upon completion of secondary education, a student may continue with studies by attending one of several forms of post-secondary instruction, often including technical schools, post-secondary or private vocational schools, union schools, training programs sponsored by state or federal legislative programs, apprenticeships, and military service (National Commission on Secondary Vocational Education, 1984).

In the offering of vocational instruction, short-cycle higher education institutions, commonly referred to as community colleges, have assumed a leadership role. The community college structure was developed as a technical extension of secondary education and continues to offer postsecondary degrees and certificates in vocational areas. While fewer students may be enrolled in vocational degree programs, the community college network has replaced four-year institutions in the upgrading and retraining of the current workforce.

Vocational Education in Hungary

Vocational instruction in Eastern Europe has become the major focus of educational reform in the 1990's. Through a loan from the World Bank, the Ministry of Labour in Hungary, for example, has begun work on restructuring and updating vocational curricula at both the primary and secondary school levels (Ministry of Labour, 1992A).

Reflective of the fact that these efforts are directed from the Ministry of Labour rather than an educational body, vocational programs are devised primarily for the concept of workforce preparation. While Western perceptions of applied education allow for vocational education as an alternative to academic or pre-college programs, vocational education in Hungary is seen as a more specialized training focused on employment, and an accepted option for academically talented students. Inherent, then, in the application of vocational programs is the idea of specific training for business and industry needs. Additionally, vocational training is, by definition, broader and less specific, including the more recent dedication to life-long learning and continuing professional education (Ministry of Labour, 1992B).

To be effective in Hungary, vocational training requires the teaching of general skills, and perhaps more importantly, the teaching of how to apply technical skills to a rapidly changing workplace. The Ministry of Labour has, in conjunction with business and industry, and leaders in the educational systems, identified four primary areas to emphasize in restructuring vocational education: electronics, industrial production applying to high technology, biotechnology (e.g., modernization of agriculture), and the service industry. Additionally, the redefinition of vocational training has called for an improvement of instruction in communications, information technology, social sciences, natural sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, and

an entire spectrum of technical subjects (Ministry of Labour, 1993).

Methods

As an emerging leader in Eastern Europe, Hungary has accepted a dynamic approach to education, allowing for a combination of traditional educational offerings to exist parallel to new and emerging institutions and approaches to offering education. In light of the presently evolving nature of formal education in Hungary, an interview technique was identified as the most appropriate form of data collection. Eight leading Hungarian vocational education experts who were participating in an intensive study-visit to the United States were included in the interviews.

The loosely structured interviews consisted of five predetermined questions with key probing terms identified prior to the interviews. In addition to transcripts of each interview, notes were taken throughout the interview of key terms or themes. The transcripts and notes comprised the formal data base to be used in developing a portrait of Hungarian vocational education.

Findings

As Eastern Europe embraces and examines a constellation of educational media and computer-aided technologies, the challenge to education reform has been the creation of a positive policy framework for education and school-based job training. In the development of this framework, many educators have explored

different cultures and systems in the hope of learning from the mistakes and successes of other cultures. The individuals involved in this examination felt that one of the primary unique characteristics of Hungarian vocational training was the lack of separation between the stereotypes of those who are in vocational and avocational programs. One leader commented "you are known by the people you know and you are perceived by them by your outcome, your performance - so there really is no separation between academic and technical."

A clustering of common themes identified in the interview resulted in three distinct categories: Learner or student autonomy, administrative autonomy, and teacher and faculty autonomy.

Learner Autonomy: This category arose from participants' discussion of financing higher education for students, the input that students have into the types and roles of their studies, and the incorporation of students with special needs into the common education "block." Participants described two types of financing mechanisms for postsecondary education: the social scholarship, which is awarded by the social or financial need of the student, and the learning scholarship. A learning scholarship can be sought by students who acquire a required 3.5 grade point average (the scale being 5 to 1, five being the highest). This type of support covers "almost all the expenses and costs that might arise in life while studying such as accommodations or eating."

The student that attends a school of higher learning can

expect to have the first three years of studies determined by major. During the third year,a student begins to gain "academic" freedom in determining the shift or concentration of studies.

Traditionally, the student that drops out of school, at any level, and the special needs populations, have not been taken into any remedial or alternative education settings. Therefore the Hungarian system has acquired the task of "trying a new system which will help all the people who dropped out of school for various reasons, either because they couldn't learn or they had some special needs." The program which is designed to help youths 14-18 years of age is an organized advisory system that offers assistance and career counseling to individuals who are either special needs, drop outs, or simply those who desire higher education.

Administrative Autonomy: The autonomy of administration factions of postsecondary education in Hungary was developed around data collected about coordination, equipment, and positions. The coordination is handled through hierarchy typically consisting of: university, college, institutes, and technical schools. The university, taught by faculty called university teachers, "is generally the higher level of quality and instruction, depending on the individual institution". For example, the Technical University of Budapest has more theoretical framework while the technical colleges offer greater numbers of classes and subjects directly related to workforce preparation.

Respondents considered the technical and vocational programs to be entering a non-beneficial time. The equipment they have purchased under the previous system was limiting to the amount and quality of instruction. For example outdated manufacturing equipment in postsecondary institutions has seriously limited the job training ability of these schools to fill the needs of a technolgically pervasive and rapidly changing production economy.

Teacher Autonomy: Teacher autonomy, or the training and retraining of teachers in the Hungarian school system is based on the traditional universities. "We think that the quality of Hungarian teachers are fairly good. It might be because the old teachers, scholars, tutors, and the old universities somehow created very nice and very fine schools." Retraining for teachers in Hungary is not formalized, however, they pursue for different academic goals, such as the Ph.D. and Ed.D. "But we don't have the traditional retraining for teachers" commented one study participant.

The context and application is unique to the changing Eastern block. Overall, the findings showed that the Hungarians are redistributing the power and function of education to a more centralized and mainstreamed approach. The learner autonomy of Hungary was shown in the special application of material and the use of target population testing.

Discussion

Postsecondary or short-cycle higher education has a diverse

history, much of which has been reliant on vocational and technical skill instruction. These institutions and vocational instruction have received a great deal of attention in what is traditionally thought of as the "West." In the Eastern Europe, however, particularly in Hungary, vocational and technical education has begun to be reconceptualized as a mechanism for workforce preparation and development.

Through an aggressive, active approach to vocational training renewal, many Hungarian administrators have taken to the study of various, differing cultures. The simple structure of these multi-national study visits provides a clear indication of the importance and growing reliance on vocational education.

Through interviews with several vocational and technical education leaders, three areas of concern and attention for future vocational growth were identified. These themes, including learners, administrators, and teachers, mirror much of the focus for educational reform in the West. This similarity not only clarifies the transcendental nature of education, but typifies the possibilities for better joint programming and collaboration for research and in-service activities.

The current investigation primarily describes the state of vocational and technical education in Hungary. From this base of description, further and more generalizable research must be undertaken to formalize the possibilities for additional, cross-national participation by administrators and policy makers from the West and Hungary.

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